



Review of "When all of Rome was under construction: The Building Process in Baroque Rome" by Dorothy Metzger Habel

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Dorothy Metzger Habel, *“When all of Rome was under construction”: The Building Process in Baroque Rome*. 2103

This is a highly focused monograph on the urban development of Piazza Colonna in Rome under the builder-pope, Alexander VII (1655-67). It is not exactly construction history, though it dovetails with, and is a good guide to, recent work in this field by Marconi, D’Amelio and McPhee, who stress the centrality of the *fabbrica* of St. Peter’s in a wide network of building projects. Habel’s focus is rather on the process of decision making which, though top-down, is nevertheless open to input from the groups most deeply affected by urban change.

Alexander VII’s dilemma was that, for most of his pontificate, money, crews, and especially travertine were sucked into the vortex of Piazza San Pietro, starving all other construction sites. If his predecessor, Innocent X, had turned Piazza Navona into a dynastic piazza, Alexander VII had a wider urban vision, aiming to transform the Via del Corso into the “hippodrome of the festive city” with grand piazzas at the northern tip (Popolo), the barycenter (Colonna), and the south end (Santa Maria in Via Lata and adjacent palaces). He wanted to ennoble many other urban nodes as well. His resources were limited. Some of these smaller *teatri* (the expression is Richard Krautheimer’s) are virtually papal projects, such as Santa Maria della Pace, but many are the work of semi-autonomous engines of urban change. The pope ordered the Oratorians, the Barnabites, the Jesuits, the Theatines, and the papal nephews of the previous regime to finish projects that had been lagging for years or decades. The illustrated books and maps churned out by the two De Rossi publishing firms would make it seem as though these herded cats were part of a grand plan called *Roma Alessandrina*. Habel is insightful on the “conversion of cash into building” and the ingenious mechanisms used to shift the cost of urban renewal away from an over-indebted papacy. She argues this to the point of saying that Piazza Colonna was essentially cost-free to the general public, though of course the public bore the cost of the entire nepotistic system, including the elevation of Alexander VII’s own family, who turned the older Palazzo Aldobrandini into the centerpiece of the square.

By triangulating between archives (Chigi, Ludovisi, del Bufalo, Spada, the Barnabites) and by the adroit use of diaries Habel can track decision-making almost by the hour. She prides herself on listening to voices from the archives that usually go unheard. A Barnabite begs the pope to spare his college eviction from Piazza Colonna. The famous administrator, Virgilio Spada, tries to get a nephew off the hook of a betterment tax. A disreputable player in the bond market floats a proposal for the piazza under the previous pope, which is scuttled when Innocent X sniffs out the hidden hand of a dangerous protagonist, the Spanish ambassador. Habel resurrects a lonely voice that Krautheimer made famous with an all-too-brief chapter in his book of 1985 on Alexander VII. Lorenzo Pizzatti was a reform-minded curial official whose proposals for waste removal rest on what social scientists today call WTP, the willingness of urban dwellers to pay if efficient services are delivered. To a pope who saw the glory of architecture Pizzatti exposes the

underside of the Baroque building boom: skyrocketing rents, neighborhoods eviscerated by grandiose buildings, small churches steamrollered out of existence by expansive neighbors, worksites indefinitely stalled. At the heart of his proposals stands a hospice for the indigent, the Ospizio di San Michele, which did eventually see the light at the end of the century. Pizzatti's dream eventually grew into the largest building in Rome outside the Vatican.

We learn much about demolition, *gettito*, the “throwing down” of buildings but also the tax that spread the financial burden onto neighbors who “benefit” from nearby reconstruction. We learn the value of *cementi*, salvage from demolition, which goes at the rate of 16% of the capital value of a structure. Demolition involves relocation, and Habel follows a train of repercussions from Piazza Colonna to far-away San Carlo ai Catinari, where a grand Barnabite college was built, partly with Ludovisi money, to house confrères evicted from Piazza Colonna. Whether he actually had a wood model of “all Rome” in his apartment at the Quirinal, as a much-quoted but now untraceable Genoese *avviso* says, Alexander VII was constantly toying with moving buildings and urban amenities around while making other people pay.

Bernini in one of his megalomaniac moments proposed moving Trajan's Column to Piazza Colonna and merging the space with Piazza Montecitorio. Pietro da Cortona wanted to build a new Trevi Fountain in the piazza. Resisting these grand rhetorical gestures, Alexander VII left Piazza Colonna as a dignified if low-key setting for the great historiated column and for the palace of his nephews, whose descendents lived here until the First World War. Habel lays out for us the key decade in the modern development of the piazza, along with revealing glimpses behind the scenes of various other projects, in this richly documented and closely argued book.

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